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Alice Maxine Hammel

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PREPARATION FOR TEACHING SPECIAL LEARNERS: TWENTY YEARS OF PRACTICE

BY ALICE MAXINE HAMMEL

Our first teacher-education experiences take place at the preservice level. It is here that many music-teacher competencies are acquired through course work and school field experiences. Competencies obtained during preservice classroom and field experiences guide beginning music teachers as they enter school classrooms. When the increase of special learners in music classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997) is considered, the need to acquire teacher competencies necessary to include special learners becomes apparent. It is imperative that preservice teachers have experiences that allow them to acquire the competencies necessary to meet the needs of special learners.

Several researchers have conducted studies on effective methods of preparing preservice students to meet special learners' needs. Wilson (1996) concluded that preservice music-education programs would be more effective if course work and field experience with special learners were included as part of the curriculum. Campbell (1995) designed a curriculum that included information about special learners

throughout course work and field experiences. One goal of this infused curriculum was to provide preservice teachers with the ability to think of creative solutions to classroom situations.

Field experience with special learners prior to student teaching is necessary (Wilczenski, 1994) for future teaching success. Wilczenski suggests that having more field experience prior to student teaching can lead to more realistic expectations and, ultimately, more accepting attitudes toward the inclusion of special learners. Askamit and Alcorn (1988) showed that less than 50% of preservice teachers had field experiences with special learners prior to graduation. Preservice teacher participants in the study indicated that more course work and field experiences with special learners are needed prior to graduation. Askamit and Alcorn (1988) assert that preservice teachers need consistent experiences with special learners and that these experiences are necessary to practice techniques used with special learners.

Researchers have also investigated specific characteristics suggested by practicing teachers for preservice field experiences. Lyon, Vaassen, and Toomey (1989) surveyed practicing

Alice Maxine Hammel is assistant professor of music at University of Richmond in Richmond, Virginia.

teachers and recommended multiple preservice field experiences that include a representative range of classroom situations and students. Teachers and principals noted a lack of special-learner field experiences during preservice education (Brown, 1981). Specifically lacking were experiences with IEP (Individualized Education Program) conferences, diagnostic tools, strategies for learning, and structured field experiences with special learners prior to the student-teaching experience. Teachers who had such experiences perceived themselves to be more confident and willing to integrate special learners into the music classroom.

Moore (1995) conducted a study to determine the perception of beginning teachers about their preservice education. Results confirmed that preservice field experiences planned to illustrate specific situations and techniques were perceived as superior by respondents. Moore (1995) concluded that preservice students who are provided course work and field experiences that introduce competencies necessary to teach students in classrooms will be better prepared for students and situations they will encounter during their teaching career.

Williams (1988) studied the relationship between perception of teacher competencies and actual preservice preparation when including special learners in classrooms. Fifty-four percent of teacher respondents reported that, as a preservice teacher, they observed a special learner for one to five hours. According to respondents, the average amount of instructional time devoted to inclusion of special learners was approximately five hours during their preservice education.

Respondents recommended that preservice teachers receive an increased amount of course work and field experience prior to graduation.

Researchers (Ansuini, 1979; Atterbury, 1993; Dalrymple, 1993; Gfeller, Darrow, & Hedden, 1990; Gilbert & Asmus, 1981; Heller, 1994; Williams, 1988) have shown that additional course work, field experiences, and the identification of specific teacher competencies will increase teaching competence with special learners. The purpose of the present research was to examine preservice course work and field experiences of practicing elementary music teachers over a 20-year period to aid in the identification of current and prior practice among college and university music education faculty members.

Method

It was hypothesized that although preservice music teachers are being prepared to include special learners in music classrooms, current methods courses do not always contain the most appropriate teacher competencies necessary to effectively teach these learners. While field experiences are integral to preservice music-education curricula, it was also hypothesized that the extent, quality, and variety of these experiences are not always appropriate for acquiring these teacher competencies. A special-learner survey form was prepared and mailed to 653 Virginia elementary music teachers. Two-hundred-two forms were completed and returned. These practicing teachers, who had taught from one to more than twenty years, identified what course work and experiences they received that focused on special learners during their preser-

vice education. Teachers indicated the types of special learners discussed during preservice classes as well as those observed and taught during preservice field experiences.

Results

Selected Responses. On the survey forms, teachers reported that, during preservice course work, special learners with educable mental retardation and learning disabilities were most frequently discussed.¹ Other types of special learners included were those with trainable mental retardation and those with hearing or visual impairments.²

When participating either as observers or teachers in preservice field experiences, music teachers indicated that they observed fewer special learners than they discussed in class and taught even fewer special learners than they observed (see Table 1). Exceptions to this were special learners with other

health impairments, learning disabilities, and emotional disabilities. These were encountered more often in field experiences than they were discussed in college and university classes. This may indicate a need for more discussion regarding these disabilities during course work in order to better prepare preservice teachers.

Respondents listed the approximate number of hours spent observing and teaching special learners during preservice field experiences (see Table 2). The vast majority of practicing teachers (76%) observed special learners from 0–5 hours prior to student teaching. A similar amount (64%) indicated that they taught classes that included special learners for between 0–5 hours during preservice field experiences. These results support earlier research by Fender and Fiedler (1990) that 53% of students are required to have field experiences with special

Table 1
Practicing Music Teachers' Report of Preservice Preparation ($N = 202$)

Types of special learners	Discussed in class	Observed during field experience	Taught during field experience
Mentally disabled-educable	49	37	36
Mentally disabled-trainable	38	34	29
Mentally disabled-severe/profound	25	18	11
Visually impaired	36	18	14
Hearing impaired	30	21	15
Speech impaired	22	26	21
Deaf-blind	21	8	4
Orthopedically disabled	23	17	16
Multiply handicapped	24	22	17
Other health impaired	14	10	15
Learning disabled	63	73	77
Emotionally disabled	30	39	46

Table 2

Practicing Teachers' Report of Preservice Field Experience ($N = 202$)

Approximate number of hours	Observed during field experience	Taught during field experience
0-5	154	131
6-15	24	23
16-25	10	16
25+	4	21
No responses	10	11

learners during their preservice education. With the increasing number of special learners included in classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997), this is not adequate to prepare preservice teachers to teach these students.

Years of teaching experience were compared with types of special learners that had been discussed during preservice classes. Also paired were years of teaching experience with types of special learners observed and taught during preservice field experiences. Analysis of these comparisons reveals that practicing teachers with the least amount of teaching experience discussed special learners during courses more than those with the most teaching experience and also observed and taught special learners during preservice field experiences more than teachers with several years of teaching experience. These results indicate that preservice curricula are beginning to reflect the increase in numbers of special learners included in elementary classrooms.

Free Responses about Preservice Course Work. Many teachers responded to the final question on the survey requesting additional areas of study or experience thought to be beneficial in preservice music education programs. Several themes that recurred frequently

are included below and have been analyzed accordingly.

A number of teachers spoke of the need for more course work regarding the inclusion of special learners in music classrooms. These teachers recommend that college and university faculty create courses that are "more real life and less ideal or perfect" and include methods and materials for adaptation in the music classroom. Several teachers even suggest that sign language classes would benefit future music teachers.

Frustration was apparent in many free-response answers received. Teachers expressed feelings of inadequacy when faced with special learners. One teacher stated:

I was never taught about special learners. My first year of teaching, I had a class of fifty that had every category from TMR (trainable mentally retarded) to the gifted in the same class. One child was prone to seizures, and no one informed me until after the fact. I was 21 and had no prior knowledge or training in this area. It was a horrible experience.

Some teachers are concerned about their ability to manage the behavior of special learners in the music classroom:

I wish I knew more on how to calm or pacify students who go into

rages. I have found that these children relate very well to music, and I have to find certain pieces of music the teacher can use to calm the student and for her to gain control of their [sic] behavior.

Several teachers talked about the importance of support staff. Special education teachers and related support staff can provide music teachers with specific medical, behavioral, and instructional information regarding special learners. One teacher said:

The biggest challenge for elementary music teachers is the reality that we teach classes where all students are combined despite special needs. Adapting the music classes for all students, whether special needs or regular education, can be difficult without support staff.

Another teacher added, "We need to know what they can do. We need individual summaries on each student annually." Unfortunately, in some instances, support staff are unsupportive of music teachers:

Have tried for ten years to be actively involved with special education department. Am not consulted regarding IEP's, not included in placements, not asked to have opinions and to share with general teachers—just not encouraged to do so.

Free Responses about Preservice Field Experiences. Many teachers stressed the importance of field experiences that include special learners during preservice education. One teacher suggested, "Experience is the best teacher. Undergraduates need field experiences early on (at least by sophomore year) that are relevant and that the college or university recognize as valid." Another

teacher suggested, "Undergraduate programs must involve the observation of varied students and address appropriate strategies for teaching situations." One teacher indicated that preservice students needed "more hands-on and/or observation of how mainstreaming really functions on a day-to-day basis. How do you help the special learners without ignoring the needs of the other twenty students?"

Many teachers report having obtained much of their knowledge about inclusion through post-graduate course work and in-service opportunities. Others discuss ways they have learned about inclusion through other teachers in their schools. One teacher stated:

Many MENC publications and conventions have been helpful in this area—workshops by experts teaching music to special learners. I take the ideas and try various adaptations until a workable plan for each child is developed. Be creative, experiment, and keep trying. I work in a school system that consistently mainstreams all types of handicapped special learners, etc., at every grade level. We expect these children to adapt and become as independent as possible. Some children have their own "shadow" or aide; some can function without one in music. Consulting with the coordinator, the occupational therapist person, social worker, etc., is essential for me to adapt, plan, and facilitate an appropriate plan for each child to participate in class at the most effective level they are capable of. Observations of unified special learners in music, consulting with experts in the field, and creative adaptations of instruments come with experience teaching special learners.

Conclusions

In summary, practicing teachers expressed frustration about their preservice preparation and experiences with special learners. Their survey responses ask college and university faculty members to include more special learner course work and field experiences for preservice music-education students. They identified specific areas as deficient, including the ability to behaviorally manage the inclusion music classroom, to become involved in the IEP process, and to communicate with special education staff more or on an ongoing basis.

Music teachers perceive themselves as attempting to include special learners in music classrooms without necessary competencies. While the data indicate that preservice music education programs are including more special learner competencies, some teachers continue to indicate that they are unprepared to include special learners in their classrooms.

Lack of preservice field experience is a concern. Some practicing music educators received less than five hours of field experience with special learners during their preservice education. In addition, the quality of these field experiences, whether guided or unguided observations, student teaching, or model demonstrations, undoubtedly had some impact on the preservice teachers as they considered them very important to their preparation.

It is important to note, however, that preservice music education programs are including topics related to the inclusion of special learners more than at any time in the past. Graduates of the last five years report receiving

more instruction and field experiences with special learners than teachers graduating fifteen years ago. College and university teacher-education programs are adapting curriculum to reflect the increased numbers of special learners in public-school classrooms.

In some cases, competencies needed by practicing music teachers are not taught during preservice education courses. The fact that music teachers do not perceive themselves as competent to include special learners, whether they have many years of experience or are new to the field, reveals a breakdown between the time of study and point of implementation. Music teachers are overcoming these perceived inadequacies by seeking competencies through workshops, graduate courses, in-service conferences, and collaboration with special-education support personnel. Although many teachers do not perceive themselves as well prepared to teach special learners, they are adapting methods and materials to the best of their ability. These teachers are committed to providing the best music education possible for all students.

Notes

1. Students with educable mental retardation are now sometimes referred to as mildly mentally disabled (MIMD).
2. Students with trainable mental retardation are now sometimes referred to as moderately mentally disabled (MOMD).

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